DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 487 UD 016 912

AUTHOR Rosen, Gerald
TITLE Marx and Skinner: Race Relations and Strange Bedfellows.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; Bias; Blacks; *Class Attitudes; Conflict; Discriminatory Attitudes (Social); Minority Groups; Motivation; *Race Relations; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Discrimination; *Racism; Social Structure; Sociology; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Marx (Karl); *Skinner (B F)

ABSTRACT

This paper places race relations theory within the general theory of human behavior which combines behaviorist psychology and Marxist theory. It argues for a revisionist theory of race relations where a situation or condition leads to a behavior pattern (discrimination) which in turn leads to an attitude (racism or prejudice). This conceptualization of institutional racism stresses social structure rather than internal or psychopathological expressions in human beings. The contention that discrimination and prejudice are rational acts and attitudes of psychologically normal persons is combined with Karl Marx's view of race relations as relations of conflict. At the group and at the individual level, behavior is rationally motivated by a strategy of maximizing reward and minimizing punishment. Understanding the foundation of race relations as the desire to maximize rewards and minimize punishment, the revisionists state that the basic race relations problem, and the basic conflict in the strategy of the majority group which makes their mini/max position dependent upon the continued exploitation of a minority group is the key to the elimination of racism in society. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED137487

MARX AND SKINNER: RACE RELATIONS AND STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

by

Gerald Rosen
California State University
Fullerton

UD 016912

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

MARX AND SKINNER: RACE RELATIONS AND STRANGE BEDFELLOWS*

*Recently, sociologists have placed increased emphasis upon social structure or social situations as an overriding causal factor in explaining discrimination and prejudice (Schermerhorn, 1970:6-7; van den Berghe, 1967:20). This conceptualization of institutional racism is joined to a critique of the more traditional psychological or social psychological explanations for prejudice and discrimination which tend to characterize these phenomena as a result of some form of psychopathology. In developing this revisionist posture in race relations, it would appear that sociologists are "heeding Skinner's call" for the development of a social technology. For, as Donald Tarter (1973:155) observes,

> When sociologists assume behavior can be better explained by references to situational definitions, attitudes, status perceptions, or any of the host of other hypothetical internal constructs they may devise, they are stopping short in their analysis, and, in the process, fail to press their investigations toward the all important reinforcement contingencies in the environment that have produced these cognitive states.

As I will argue, it is environmental reinforcement contingencies that come to play an every more important role in the structural theory of race relations. The stress on social structure, as opposed to "internal constructs," is not the only foundation for the revisionist position, there is also a response to a call from Karl Marx.

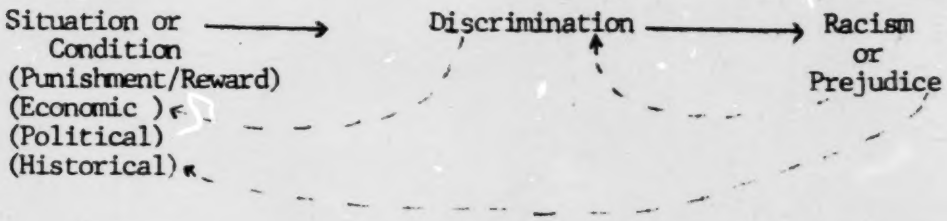
The contention that discrimination and prejudice are most often rational acts and attitudes of psychologically normal people is combined with the Marxist view of race relations as relations of conflict. Dominant and subordinate groups are locked in a conflict over a finite supply of societal goods, (Wilson, 1973:41; Yetman and Steele, 1975:4).

* I wish to express my appreciation to Richard Schermerhorn, Bart Palisi and Mike Mend for helpful comments they made on a previous draft of this paper. I, of course, am fully responsible for the papers contents.

The conflict is not irrational, generated by displaced sexual frustrations, or an authoritarian family structure, but instead, is a result of a realistic conflict of political and economic interests (Bernard, 1971). An emphasis on structural variables in race relations is in conformity with Marxist theory, but the added stress on conflict places this new sociological orientation more firmly in the Marxist tradition (Horton, 1966). Racial groups are defined as conflict groups and racism is conceptualized as an epiphenomenon, an ideological tool in the conflict, employed by the dominant group in the struggle over limited societal goods (Bernard, 1971 and Wilson, 1973:32). Racism and discrimination are dependent variables with the independent variable being situations or conditions (Schermerhorn, 1970:7). The situation or condition is, at the group level, a relationship between groups with differential access to power resources, the dominant racial group using its superior position to exploit or discriminate against the subordinate group (Wilson, 1973:41 and Yetman and Steele, 1975:5). Racism and the very definition of racial groups are an ideological developments serving to explain or justify the existence and continuation of dominant-subordiante relations. This is directly within the Marxist tradition in the analysis of ideological development. Dworkin and Dworkin (1916:90-11) observe that it was the invention of the cotton gin in the 1790's that made the continuing exploitation of slaves profitable and only then did racial prejudice develop to justify the discriminatory behavior.

Thus, discrimination and the consequent ideological development of racism can be understood in the same way as any other behaviors and

attitudes are understood. This places race relations theory within a general theory of human behavior, once combining behavioristic psychology and Marxist theory. We might look at a simple scheme that illustrates the relationship between relevant variables and which outlines the basic argument of the revisionist position:



There is interaction between variables, but the prevailing direction of causality is from social structure to behavior and only then does the ideology develop to explain or justify the rewarding or deprivation avoiding behavior.

If we define the situation as the punishment/reward contingencies of Skinnerian Behaviorism, we can see how the psychology of the above scheme functions on the individual level. The basic premis is that people act in such a way as to seek or maximize rewards and to minimize or avoid punishment. This is how "rationality" is defined. Thomas Pettigrew (1971:130) is referring to this kind of rationality in accounting for peaceful desegregation under certain conditions and violent reaction in others:

> A multiplicity of factors must be relevant, and further research is desperately needed to delineate them; but tentative early work seems to indicate that violence occurring with desegregation has been surprisingly 'rational'. That is, violence has generally resulted in localities where at least some of the authorities give hints beforehand that they would gladly return to segregation if disturbances occured; peaceful integration has generally followed firm and forceful leadership.

The rationality on the individual level is no different from the rationality posited by William Wilson to explain the motivation for the development of racial stratification at the societal level, "...Although differential power provides the basis for a system of racial stratification, group desires to control or maximize scarce resources furnish the motivation for developing the system and for putting it into operation" (1973:41; See also Blauner, 1973:21; Gelfand and Lee, 1973:7). This view assumes, at the group level, the kind of rationality in human behavior that we find in Skinner, but it tends to be devoid of the kind of analysis which could lead to an understanding of the implications of this theoretical position. It is evident that autonomous man has disappeared at the group level and as we shall see, the revisionist theory also does away with him at the individual level. In attempting to show that, at the group and individual level, behavior is rationally motivated by a strategy of maximizing reward and minimizing punishment, the view that discrimination results from psychopathology or cultural pathology is contradicted. At the same time, Skinner's position is confirmed.

Two types of evidence might be applied in illustrating and confirming the situation/behavior/attitude relationship as it relates to race relations. One is evidence that disproves the contention that attitudes cause behavior. Pierre van den Berghe uses Robert Merton's paradigm to explain this position when he contends that the only way to explain the conforming behavior of a prejudiced nondiscriminator and a nonprejudiced discriminator is in terms of "social determinism",

the cost/reward contengencies presented by the situation (van den Berghe, 1967:20-21). Deutscher (1966:236) and Lipset and Raab (1971:34) cite Richard La Pierre's classic study of the discontinuity between stated attitudes and behavior in supporting their contention that situational factors are important determinants of behavior, regardless of attitudes. This does not deny that there may be nonconformity or nonsituational determinants of behavior. The prejudiced discriminator and the nonprejudiced nondiscriminator who act in accordance with their attitudes irregardless of the punishment or withdrawal of rewards imposed by the situation would be examples of this possibility. Yinger (1965:244-266) in attempting to develop a field theory of prejudice and discrimination has argued that a balanced theory must include social psychological variables in addition to the structural variables suggested by Merton, Warner and DeFleur (1969:153-169) in a study of situational constraints upon discriminatory behavior aimed at testing Yinger's formulations, come to the tentative conclusion that situational variables and individual tendencies are jointly responsible for discriminatory behavior, but that situational factors have a significant impact on behavior which may contradict attitudinal predispositions. This research, although tending to support the position that most behavior is motivated by the mini/max behaviorist logic of action, cautions us to be aware of nonconforming behavior which may be explained by conventional psychological or social psychological theory.

Another study, not directly involving race relations, but with undeniable implications in this area, is Stanly Milgram's experiments with obedience (1974). Here, subjects were pressured through an experimental situation to administer electric shocks to (discriminate

against?) a person they thought was suffering from the painful shocks. In this experiment the subject's attitudes about harming others were violated when the situation pressured them into behavior contrary to their attitudes. Furthermore, there was some evidence that the subjects were developing attitudes (post facto) to explain or justify their behavior (Milgram, 1974:10). There were those who defied the experimenter and refused to administer shocks when they realized that their actions could result in harm to another person, but the prevailing behavior was obedient.

Lipset and Raab (1971:36-38) offer evidence which illustrates the second approach to the situation/behavior/attitude relationship--their review of relevant research includes Deutsch and Collins' study of integrated housing and Stouffers' work on the integration of the military. Both studies found a change in attitudes following a change in situation and behavior. Lipset and Raab conclude that "The evidence has demonstrated how both attitudes and behavior are affected by the social frame of reference in which they occur." (1971:38)

In discussing the character of the situation or the "social frame of reference" Lipset and Raab see it as being imbedded in community practices which "...typically reproduce themselves by force of custom" (1971:44). They carry their analysis to the point of recognizing that "when this pattern of community practice changes--whether by law, direct action, or otherwise; whether willingly or reluctantly--the prevailing pattern of community attitudes will be likely to change accordingly" (1971:45). This second type of evidence therefore leads to the conclusion that morality can be legislated; that

there is a practical solution to racial discrimination and situational change is basic to this solution. You don't advocate education, psychoanalysis, or appeals to conscience, but, instead, you make discrimination costly and nondiscrimination rewarding. The good attitudes will follow. What Lipset and Raab fail to do, and what the full blown revisionist position does, is to include the dialectic aspect of race relations.

Understanding the foundation of race relations as the desire to maximize rewards and minimize punishment, the revisionists see the basic race relations problem, and the basic conflict in the strategy of the majority group which makes their mini/max position dependent upon the continued exploitation of a minority group. We can see how Killian combines the view that attitudes are secondary with the emphasis upon a realistic conflict between majority and minority:

> ...The racial problem grows not out of the soil of individual prejudice, but out of the very social structure itself. No matter how much white Americans may deplore the cruder forms of discrimination and the more obvious consequences of prejudice, they are not likely to make the sacrifices needed to change the fact that America is still a white man's society. The theme of Black Power reflects the growing disillusionment of Negro Americans with the white man's willingness to give up his position of supremacy. (1968:XV. See also van den Berghe, 1967:145).

On the group level, we have the rational desire of whites to maintain an advantageous position and the rational desire of Blacks to alter that situation. We can see that individuals fit into this relationship in the same manner as groups, for they come to be constrained by the cost/reward contingencies of the institutions which define majority-minority relations. There are many factors which create change in majority-

minority relations, among them are economic, historical, political, demographic and technological trends, but a most important agent of change is the minority group. Just as the majority is motivated by its own self interest in maintaining its dominant position, so the minority is motivated, and acts, under certain conditions, to change its situation of subordination. In essence, Killian's (1968) description of the Black struggle in America depicts a group that learned a lesson that was, in a practical way, related to revisionist theory. They found that appeals to conscience were not working, and that in the last analysis, it would be Black Power, the capacity to make discrimination costly (or at the minimum less rewarding), that would decrease or end discrimination.

If the Black working to end discrimination and the white acting in such a way as to maintain discrimination (consciously or unconsciously) are acting out of similar motivations--the behaviorist motivation of maximizing rewards and minimizing costs--then we can see how the revisionist theory offers a rather full understanding of race relations and we have indeed taken man "beyond freedom and dignity" (Skinner, 1971). This conclusion would appear to be in accord with Schermerhorn's discussion of problems relating to an emphasis on discrimination in race relations research. He contends that,

> ...'Discrimination,' as employed by writers in intergroup relations, is an invidious, moralistic term; it fastens a value judgment on the persons engaging in the designated acts.. It implies that the people performing such acts are violating a widespread social norm and that, really, they shouldn't. One can only applaud such humanitarian sentiments while remaining puzzled over their explanatory value...(1970:7)

Schermerhorn also notes that minorities are often evaluated as victims, without due consideration of the potential threat posed by minorities to majorities (1970:8). In either case, unwarranted evaluations of behavior are made, which would be invalidated by an understanding of the social situation. This position is also reflected in Harold Baron's characterization of modern institutional racism:

> Maintenance of the basic racial controls is now less dependent upon specific discriminatory decisions. Such behavior has become so well institutionalized that the individual generally does not have to exercise a choice to operate in a racist manner. The rules and procedures of the large organization have alread prestructured the choice. The individual only has to conform to the operating norms of the organization and the institution will do the discriminating for him. (1969:142-143)

The pressure toward conformity, enforced by socially structured rewards and punsihments can result in obedient behavior from minority and majority group members.

The minority group member may, because of institutional pressures, discriminate against his racial bretheren, so why should this behavior be evaluated any differently than the rock throwing whites in Boston, the Southern redneck or the white union member who supports discriminatory union, (see Milgram, 1974:6)? We certainly understand the disproportionate share of minorities in prison as resulting from situational pressures, so why can't the brutal ghetto cop be understood in the same way? From the revisionist perspective, they are. For that matter, those who conformed to the demands of Nazi society and discriminated against Jews are to be understood in a similar way. Dworkin and Dworkin recognize these implications of revisionist theory and reject them but the unease is evident.

> The recognition of institutional racism, like organizations it describes is a double-edged instrument. By contending that the ideology blinds one to the consequences of ones acts, by contending that the causes of the differential treatment of minorities are so ingrained in the very fabric of the society as to be covert and unconscious, is to argue that: (1) only total societal change is effective in dealing with the problem - a point which has validity; but also (2) individuals cannot be held culpable for their discriminatory behavior and prejudiced attitudes - which is not correct. To contend that racism is principally a societal problem is to excuse the actions of prejudiced individuals who are seen merely as victims of the society's system of socialization. (1976:65)

Morality and immorality can be the result of social arrangements and neither evaluations is apropos when an individual is the subject of study.

In a field like race relations, the moral issues are never far from the scientific surface. I discovered Marx and Skinner in flagrante delicto while teaching minority group relations and I found myself confronting my students with the full implications of the theory developed out of this union. I came to Skinner from a Marxist orientation. However innocently I came to the discovery of the implications of the Marx-Skinner relationship, I have been confronted with the uncomfortable, even appalling, moral implications of Skinner's theory, made even more uncomfortable and appalling when applied to race relations. This theory has some salutary aspects, in that it leads to an understanding of realistic solutions to racial problems even though the likelihood of their realization may be minimal. There is also a nagging feeling that a realistic look at man in society may not always yield optimistic results and for the future of sociology, this may be all for the best. Lewis Killian has presented this position very well:

> The unwillingness of the sociologist to be a true pessimist, or realist--his tendency to draw back from predicting that no matter what the members of a society may do things will not turn out all right according to whatever standards he cherishes--restricts his sociological imagination in a number of ways...(1971:283)

REFERENCES

Baron, Harold
1969 "The Web of Urban Racism." Pp. 134-176 in Louis L. Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt (eds.); Institutional Racism in America. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Bernard, Jessie
1971 "The Conceptualization of Intergroup Relations with Special Reference to Conflict." Pp. 25-31 in Gary Marx (ed.), Racial Conflict. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Blauner, Robert
1972 Racial Oppression in America. New York: Harper and Row.

Deutscher, Irwin
1966 "Words and Deeds: Social Science and Social Policy." Social Problems 8:235-254.

Dworkin, Anthony Gary and Rosalind J. Dworkin (eds.)
1976 The Minority Report. New York: Praeger

Gelfand, Donald E. and Russell D. Lee
1973 Ethnic Conflicts and Power: A Cross-National Perspective. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Horton, John
1966 "Order and Conflict Theories of Social Problems as Competing Ideologies." The American Journal of Sociology 71 (May): 701-713.

Killian, Lewis M.
1971 "Optimism and Pessimism in Sociological Analysis." The American Sociologist 6 (November): 281-286

1968 The Impossible Revolution. New York: Random House.

Lipset, Seymour and Earl Raab
1971 "The Prejudiced Society," Pp. 31-45 in Gary Marx (ed.). Racial Conflict. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Milgram, Stanley
1974 Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View. New York: Harper and Row.

Pettigrew, Thomas F.
1971 Racially Separate or Together? New York: McGraw Hill.

Schermerhorn, R. A.
1970 Comparative Ethnic Relations. New York, Random House.

Skinner, B. F.
1971 Beyond Freedom and Dignity. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Tarter, Donald E.
1973 "Heeding Skinner's Call: Toward the Development of a Social Technology." The American Sociologist 8 (November): 153-158.

van den Berghe, Pierre L.
1967 Race and Racism. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Wilson, William J.
1973 Power, Racism, and Privilege. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Yetman, Norman R. and C. Hoy Steel (eds.)
1975 Majority and Minority. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Yinger, J. Milton
1965 Toward a Field Theory or Behavior. New York:McGraw Hill.

Warner, Lyle G. and Melvin L. DeFleur
1969 "Attitude as an Interactional Concept: Social Constraint and Social Distance as Intervening Variables." American Sociological Review 34 (April): 153-169.